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ABSTRACT

In a review of statewide plans for assessing student learning at institutions of higher education, this paper argues that assessment, carefully planned to focus on students, can lead to an improvement in the communication and understanding between the academy and the polity. A brief section on the role of statewide assessment places it in a historical and legal context. A section on the research and its findings concludes that assessment is most useful if efforts are clearly centered on students by identifying subgroups of students who profit from their studies, identifying aspects of their experience, and by understanding how these provide enlightenment, engagement, and empowerment. The next section argues that funding formulas and budget request and decentralized assessment approaches have made institutions, rather than students, the primary object of analysis. The solution is formative assessment that documents how resources devoted to each major subgroup of students are paying off. Allocation of resources can then be made in terms of the proportion of any one student group served by each institution. The next section, on statewide initiatives, describes the Oregon state system of higher education's new statewide assessment that focuses on common learning criteria and assessment at multiple points in time. A Utah effort is also briefly described. (Contains 19 references.) (JB)

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Putting Students at the Center of Statewide Assessment Plans

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Why Statewide Assessment

Some would say that assessment began with statewide initiatives. While institutions such as Alverno College, the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, and Northeast Missouri State University gained national recognition for their individual institutional efforts in the 1980s, statewide initiatives have played a fundamental role in stimulating the attention given to assessment. Organizations representing the educational interests of the states, such as the National Governors' Association (NGA) (Alexander, Clinton & Kean, 1991) and the Education Commission of the States (ECS) (1986), together with reports, such as ***Involvement in Learning*** (1984) and ***Integrity in the College Curriculum*** (1985) fostered discussion among legislators and governors and resulted in such statewide initiatives (Sims, 1992).

Statewide initiatives in assessment often have been viewed negatively because they frequently are seen as an intrusion on academic freedom or institutional autonomy. They are presumed to lead to standardized testing, "dubbing down" the educational program to the lowest ability students, and "teaching to the test."

Conventional wisdom says that assessment at the institutional level is good; assessment at the state level is a threat. This view began during the 1980s when most institutions implemented assessments of student learning as a result of outside pressure from state government or an accrediting agency. By 1990, all six regional accrediting agencies and 4 out of 5 state governments had taken some action to stimulate institutions to implement student assessment programs (Banta, 1993). People are quick to point to the "tyranny" and "intrusion on autonomy" that state level assessment poses. However, state-level assessment can be used to the advantage of higher education to garner public support.

Because Tennessee was the first state to adopt a student assessment policy (in 1979), and because that policy involved statewide standardized testing and funding based on the results of the assessments, statewide assessment initiatives became associated with standardized testing and with direct links to government funding formulas.

With far less attention, Virginia put forward a statewide assessment policy in 1985 that allowed institutions to select the criteria, methods and measures for assessments of general education and major fields of study in undergraduate studies. To the extent that few states today specify the methods and measures to be used, they tended to follow the Virginia rather than the Tennessee model (Ewell, 1993). It would be wrong to conclude, however, that there is a predominant "model" of statewide assessment policies. In fact, no two state policies are truly the same (Paulson, 1990) and few are grounded in research on assessment (Ewell, 1988).

The state government interest in assessment was a direct result of the concern of the National Governors' Association and the Education Commission of the States concern for the quality of the nation's schools. Three powerful and politically ambitious governors led the NGA report on education: Lamar Alexander, Bill Clinton, and Thomas Kean. Alexander (Tennessee) and Kean (New Jersey) represented states who had taken the statewide testing approach. As Clinton entered the White House, he continued to champion the agenda of the NGA, but he came to favor a more decentralized approach.

Given our recent research at the National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning and Assessment, we see a more positive role for statewide assessments of student learning in higher education. If carefully crafted, assessment can lead to an improvemnt in the communication and understanding between the academy and the polity. Such a reframing cannot come at a better time, for the public interest and confidence in higher education is at a low point The public is questioning: the quality of programs, institutions' ability to prepare students for the increasingly complex technological demands of society, faculty's credibility and time management, and institutions' use of resources. This menacing situation can be turned from a threat to an opportunity. In this paper, we outline a role for statewide assessment that augments and enhances, rather than conflicts and duplicates programmatic and institutional accreditation and provides for institutionally-crafted assessments of student learning.

A role for statewide assessment

The U.S. Constitution gives the states the legal responsibility for providing education. In the case of higher education, states have delegated that responsibility in a variety of ways. Through charters, states have given the right to independent universities and colleges to educate according to the mission and aims of the charter. Through the state constitution, certain states have created state universities (e.g., California, Michigan, etc.) that are literally fourth branches of government. Most public colleges and universities were created by state statute, again to accomplish a specific mission and aims. Finally, many community, junior and technical colleges are a combination of local and state government. Like local school districts, community college districts have received local operating and taxing authority to serve a specified region within a state to provide transfer, occupational, remedial/developmental and/or community education programs and services. In all cases, while the states have delegated the responsibility for providing higher education to different kinds and types of institutions, they retain jurisdiction over the educational enterprise and have the authority to review and evaluate the quality and adequacy of education provided.

States generally have not taken a very active role in overseeing higher education or in determining its quality. Programmatic quality is often delegated to professional licensure associations, such as the Accrediting Board for Engineering Education (ABET), while overall institutions, quality has been left to regions' accrediting agencies. However, where states have insisted on institutions developing student assessment plans, greater levels of effort and direction have been achieved in determining the impact of higher education on student learning (Ewell. 1993).

What the Research Says

Variation in student learning is greater within institutions than between them (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Ratcliff, 1993; Pascarella, et al., 1994). Consequently, while there are differences in student learning from institution to institution, the greatest differences are to be found within the institutions among the students.

Consider this. After examining roughly 4,000 undergraduates in all types and sizes of colleges and universities -- from research institutions, to liberal arts colleges, to community colleges -- we found that students enrolled in community colleges learned as much their first year as their counterparts in baccalaureate-granting institutions in key subject areas, such as reading comprehension, math and critical thinking. These findings do not mean that all students should rush out and enroll in community colleges. Each college and university attracts a self-selected population of students. Rather, it suggests that those students who chose a community college showed comparable achievement to those enrolling in other forms of higher education.

We found similar results when we examined African-American students enrolled in historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). These students showed achievement in reading comprehension, writing, mathematics, and critical thinking equal to, or greater than, their African-American counterparts attending predominantly white institutions. Again, the lesson is not that all African-Americans should attend HBCUs but that those who choose to do so profit well from their experience. Such large scale, cross-institutional assessment affirms that the American system of higher education is working.

Despite these similarities between institutions, great disparities exist within the institutions themselves. When we examined the formal curriculum students took, we found patterns of coursework taken by students who showed marked superior achievement. When we examined purposefully constructed collaborative learning environments, federated learning communities, and cooperative learning classrooms, again we found significant greater gains in student learning and achievement.

Every college and university enrolls both students who learn a great deal and develop significantly during their undergraduate studies, and students who drop out or do not profit from their experience. If those who do not benefit are bright students to begin with, most likely they will emerge bright graduates but no better from their undergraduate experience. If they are less able students, they may not complete their educational aims. The curriculum of every type of institution we examined appeared to be geared more to those above the mean (for that institution) than to those below the mean, which affirms our conviction that assessment works best when geared to formative aims. If we can identify which students are learning the most and why and which students are not profiting from their collegiate experience and why, then we can learn from the former and better assist the latter.

With the focus on institutional assessment, most plans ask how well the institution is doing and to treat students as an amorphous mass in doing so. Since students come into our institutions with a great variety of interests, abilities, and learning styles, assessment would be more useful if our efforts were centered on students.

Putting students at the center means identifying those who profit from their undergraduate studies, identifying the salient subenvironments of curriculum and extracurriculum they encountered, and learning how these provided enlightenment, engagement, and empowerment. We can learn from our successes and avoid our failures by looking within our institutions to see what works for whom and why. This, I submit, is the challenge that lays before us in the next decade.

Putting Students at the Center

While it is reasonable for a state to ask, "What benefits result from our investment in higher education?", such questions have been followed by institution by institution analyses of student assessment results rather than analyses of student achievement within institutions. Funding formulas and budget requests, as well as our decentralized approach to assessment, have made institutions (rather than students) the primary object of analysis.

Statewide assessment of student learning should be focused on students. States have made investments in various groups of students. Most states can demonstrate specific higher education resource allocation to rural students, urban commuter students, traditional college-age residential students, and certain historically under represented groups in higher education (e.g., women, specific racial and ethnic minority students). Within each of these groups, there are students who show significant learning gains and those who do not. It is a reasonable aim of statewide assessments to look formatively at each student group in which the state has

invested to see who has profited and who has not.

Consider two institutions within a single state. Urban university shows a 17% first year to baccalaureate retention rate and low student achievement in writing, math, and critical thinking. Rural university shows a 40% retention rate and significantly greater student performance in the aforementioned areas of learning. When differences in student background are controlled, the results in learning and retention are roughly equal between the two institutions. The institutional differences were largely attributable to student differences: Urban university had more part-time and commuter students who tended to have higher drop-out rates and lower levels of achievement. It would be easy for a legislator or citizen to misinterpret assessment data presented institution by institution, concluding that Urban provides an inferior education. Putting students at the center of statewide assessments alleviates this problem and highlights state investments by student subgroups.

Another common misinterpretation has occurred regarding the time it takes a student to complete a degree. Legislators have been concerned that students seem to be taking longer and longer to complete a baccalaureate. Yet, it was the same state legislature in the 1950s and 1960s who created open access institutions to serve part-time, adult and commuting students. These students frequently must balance time for work and time for family with time for being a student. They typically take longer to complete their degree. As the proportion of part-time and commuter students rises among the total student population, some legislators erroriously have reached the conclusion that students are "lazy" and are not working diligently toward degree completion or that the colleges they attend are not providing an efficient and expeditious curriculum. Nine of the eleven western states are considering or have implemented state policies to penalize students who take longer to complete their degrees, even though the time to degree statistics may be skewed by the rising proportion of non-traditional students, due to the aformenetioned state level commitment to access and diversity.

Another problem arises with transfer students. In urban areas, students increasingly choose among institutions of higher education for individual courses. Then, when they amass sufficient credits, they find the most expedient institution in which to attain their degree. We examined the transcripts of transfer students from Clayton State College (in suburban Atlanta) who had completed their baccalaureate degree at Georgia State University. We found that they also attended Kennesaw College, Atlanta Junior College, DeKalb Community College, Emory University, and a host of other institutions in the Atlanta metropolitan area. Of 100 students identified as transfers from Clayton State, 20 had never attended Clayton State (Ratcliff, Hoffman & Jones, 1991). They were listed as Clayton students because that was the last institution of record on their transcript. These 20 students had enrolled and withdrawn from Clayton, thereby never having had any significant educational

experience at the institution. Nonetheless, for statewide reporting purposes and for the purposes of admission to Georgia State, they had been regarded as Clayton students. Whose students were they anyway? They were their own masters. They were part-time students whose enrollment was being counted by several institutions simultaneously as they dropped-in one institution, then another, while dropping-out of a third. Institutional assessments will not garner a meaningful profile of these students' successes and difficulties, achievements and failures. Only by pooling assessment information and agreeing to some cross-cutting criteria can we begin to accurately profile the growth and development of these students.

A solution to such situations is statewide assessments based on students, not institutions. Those assessments can and should have a formative focus (Erwin, 1993) and should illustrate how resources devoted to each major subgroup of students are paying off (Ewell, 1994). Allocation of resources can be made in terms of the proportion of any one student group served by each institution. In this manner, institutional reports of statewide assessment results would highlight how the salient subgroups of students performed in their specific campus environment.

Statewide Initiatives

Initiatives are underway in a number of states to put students at the center of their assessment planning. As Serbrenia Sims has pointed out (1992), such statewide assessments, in and of themselves, are not at all new. The Pennsylvania Study of Student Learning, commensing in 1928, assessed nearly all the college sophomores and seniors in all the state's institutions of higher education. The purpose was to determine what the baccalaureate "amounts to in terms, first, of clear, available, important ideas, and second, of ability to discriminate exactly among ideas and use them accurately in thinking" (Learned and Wood, 1938, p. 371). What is new are statewide initiatives that put students at the center of statewide assessment plans.

The chief academic officers of the Oregon State System of Higher Education (OSSHE), under the leadership and support of Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, Shirley Clark, have met, discussed, and approved a framework for a statewide assessment of student learning. In their deliberations, they decided to leave assessing the unique curricular aims of their institutions primarily to the regional and programmatic accrediting reports. The OSSHE efforts focuses on the common learning criteria currently used for admissions and enrollment reporting as a basis for identifying broad areas of learning that cut across institutional differences and represent key subject areas and cognitive skills to be considered in the statewide effort. Thus, the framework incorporates assessment at multiple points in time (entry, midpoints, and exit), and mutliple criteria reflecting areas of learning represented across institutions. The areas identified included assessment of

retention and degree completion rates (to monitor the state's commitment to access), writing, math, science, social science, and critical thinking skills. They decided to begin with a few areas of assessment (critical thinking, writing, retention), adding others in subsequent years of development.

During this first year, faculty representatives identified by the Provost or Vice President for Academic Affairs have been meeting to identify key critical thinking skills that could be assessed across institutions. OSSHE has been compiling retention and degree completion information. A new draft report that reports assessment data utilizing both qualitative and quantitative data on each salient student group is being prepared.

Meanwhile, OSSHE has sponsored pilot assessment projects at the various institutions within the state system. The pilot projects seek to identify promising criteria, methods, and measures for assessment building upon the exemplary practices found among the institutions. Institutions with pilot projects are being asked to examine the applicability of their assessment techniques to other member institutions in the system.

The aim is to use the pilot projects and the statewide conferences on each area of learning to be assessed as a basis for selecting, trying out, and implementing statewide student assesssment. Again, the focus has been on differentiating between salient subgroups of students and on identifying within each group who is succeeding and who is not. The whole effort is intended to be formative: to assist the institutions in improving teaching and learning and to assist the state in identifying where best to invest scarce state resources. This effort places students, not institutions, at the center of the assessment process.

In Utah, the Regents' Task Force on General Education Assessment has identified key learning criteria that cut across the two- and four-year colleges and the universities. Again, curricular and programmatic aims unique to single institutions have been left to those institutions to assess and report. Key knowledge and skills in writing, quantitative analysis, computer and information technology, and American institutions have been discussed by Task Force subcommittees consisting of faculty in pertinent disciplines from across the state. Again, the focus of the effort is on students and student learning.

Conclusions

Legislators need to make tough choices between support for prisons, welfare, transportation, and higher education. States have the responsibility for the oversight of higher education, they want some evidence that they are making the right decision when they continue to support colleges and universities and the students who attend them.

In order to give states greater understanding and greater confidence in higher education, statewide assessments can be constructed which highlight the performance of significant subgroups of students. Using student outcomes on mutually-agreed upon criteria, student subgroups can be identified relative to performance. Such assessments can and should be based on multiple measures. Using a formative approach, incentive funding can be directed toward those specific student subgroups and areas of learning where improvement is needed or achievement looks most promising.

If we in the academy take an active lead and initiate discussions across institutions of higher education regarding common learning of students, we can take the first step toward putting students at the center of statewide assessments. By portraying in quantitative and qualitative terms the success of commuting and part-time students, we can help legislators, policy makers and citizens better understand students' motivations to attend college and the challenges they face in succeeding. By illustrating the continuing performance of traditional college-age students, we can better represent how they benefit from the collegiate experience. In short, we can turn statewide assessment from a threat into an opportunity, and in doing so, clarify the role of the state, the institution, and the accrediting body in assuring quality in higher education.

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